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Rwanda: Genocide Book Launched Amid Media Criticism

Both international and Rwandan media have been blamed for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, with the former having kept silent as massive slaughters raged in the country, and the latter contributing to the massacres.

Speaking yesterday during the launch of a new book on the genocide titled "The Media and the Rwandan genocide", experts and officials said the media played a destructive role during the massacres that claimed an estimated one million ethnic Tutsis and Hutu moderates.

The author of the 480-page-book, Prof. Alan Thompson, a lecturer at Carleton University in Canada, criticized the western media for deliberately "absenting" themselves during the genocide.

He cited one particular intriguing example when the foreign media ignored publishing a ten-minute footage of two innocent Rwandan women pleading with their murderers.

"We cannot overlook the impact of the role played by the international media. No one paid attention. The western media did not live up to their responsibility. In addition, decision makers (United Nations) were determined not to intervene. Belgium, the US and France (all members of the UN Security Council) did not need the media to tell them what to do," Thompson, a practicing Canadian journalist and intellectual, said during a three-hour debate.

He equally attacked the hate media in Rwanda for abandoning their professional standards at the time professionalism mattered most. He advised: "Hate media can be regulated through marginalisation. The best way is to fill space with high-quality, professional journalism."

And Rwanda's Ambassador to Uganda, Ignatius Karegesa Kamali, who was also the Chief Guest, castigated the behaviour of the western media, adding that even after the genocide, nothing much had changed positively.

"What happened in Rwanda? Was there absence of these 'good people' (foreign media)? Were they few? Did they come late? We think the journalists were in Rwanda, they were few and they came late. But there was some information that was passed on. The argument is, wasn't that enough to cause international response?" wondered the ambassador.

About 556 news items on Rwandan genocide appeared in foreign media, which was half what was published on the 1995 Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia, which claimed about 8,000 people.

"We are in a period of reconstruction. We need assistance. We need researchers; people to come and find out what happened so that it never happens again. But even when the RPF stopped the genocide, much was still needed to heal the people. Survivors are still traumatized but here isn't much that has been done," Karegesa decried.

He questioned why there was little response from the international community despite having received "some" information on the slaughters. The Rwandan envoy said the United Nations was warned and even received details of a plan to exterminate Tutsis but did nothing to save lives of the victims.

Ugandan Presidential Adviser on the Media John Nagenda, also lambasted the international community for failing to prevent or prevent the killings. "I will never forget what happened in 1994. I got sick when they attacked (killing people)," said Nagenda.

He said the former UN Secretary-General, Koffi Anan, should take full responsibility for the genocide "since he was the one in charge of the peacekeeping force" at the time. And the managing director of The New Vision, a Ugandan government-owned newspaper, Robert Kabushenga, attacked the western press for making economic capital out of the genocide.

"Now is the time for them (foreign journalists) to cash in. I have not seen any local (African) journalist who covered the genocide who was awarded. It is the Americans and the British (that receive the awards). It is very unprofitable to rely on the foreign media. I am even wondering whether it is useful to pattern up because at a critical moment they let us down."

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